

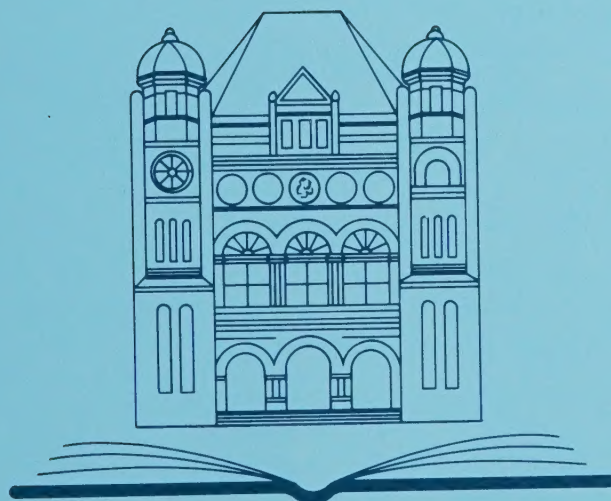
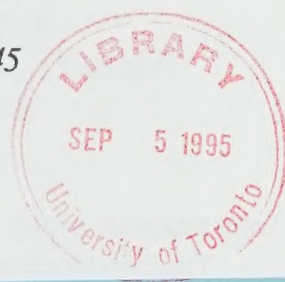
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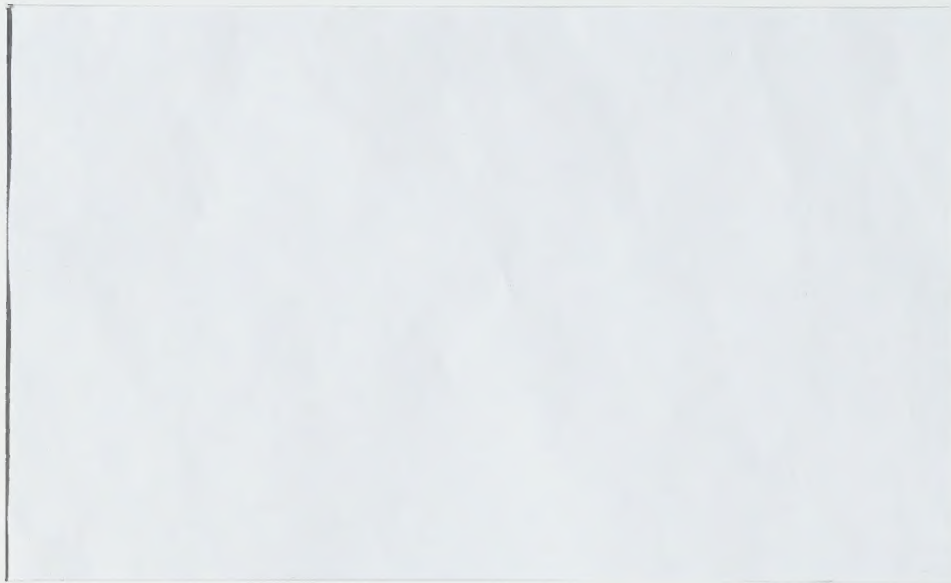
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**HAS PARLIAMENTARY TELEVISION  
MET MEMBERS' EXPECTATIONS?**

*Current Issue Paper 145*



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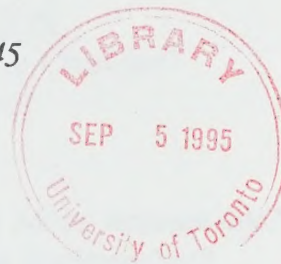
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## **HAS PARLIAMENTARY TELEVISION MET MEMBERS' EXPECTATIONS?**

*Current Issue Paper 145*




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August 1993





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## INTRODUCTION

For centuries the British House of Commons at Westminster would not permit its deliberations to be recorded: Members feared reprisals from the Crown, should their speeches be badly received. Today, a comprehensive and public record of debates is considered essential to the parliamentary process. *Hansard*, after Thomas Hansard, the man credited with first reporting House of Commons debates at Westminster, became the official record of parliamentary debates in Canada on May 4, 1880.<sup>1</sup> In the age of television, the Canadian Parliament and several provincial legislatures have chosen to supplement their printed deliberations with a televised record of proceedings. Unlike printed *Hansard*, however, which is universally accepted, reaction to television *Hansard* has been mixed.

This paper will attempt to evaluate the 1985 decision to televise Ontario's legislative proceedings. In particular, it will review Members' early expectations of television *Hansard* and examine the extent to which these assumptions have been borne out both federally and in Ontario. Opinion polls in Canada indicate a weakening of the public's faith in their political leaders and in the parliamentary process, and a secondary aim of this paper is to explore possible links between televised proceedings and public opinion.

## BACKGROUND

### How Cameras Came to the House

Television was becoming an important political medium by the late 1950s; serious discussion about bringing television to the Canadian Parliament began about 1962. At that time, and until 1977, portable television cameras were prohibited inside the House of Commons' chamber. Television clips of parliament, such as they were, consisted of media "scrums" of the Prime Minister and MPs in the parliamentary corridors and press building television studios.



Problems developed as, increasingly, the government was making important policy announcements to television journalists outside the Commons chamber rather than to the Members inside the house. Even journalists noticed the excessive prominence granted the scrum. Commenting on the activity taking place outside the Commons following the near defeat of the Pearson minority government in 1968, one journalist reported:

(The) Television (scrum) had become not a passive medium of communication but an active instrument of political policy. The fight over who was or who should be running the country was being waged not in the Commons . . . but before TV cameras in the crowded, cable cluttered corridors outside. It was an arch-lit free-for-all . . . <sup>2</sup>

Early advocates of parliamentary television argued that allowing cameras inside the House would move the focus of parliamentary debate back inside the Commons chamber, thereby giving Members a greater role in the parliamentary process. The debate became more pressing as federal MPs felt the need to increase the visibility of the federal Parliament following the 1976 election of the Parti Québécois in Quebec.

A parliamentary television system, operated and controlled through the Office of the Speaker, was introduced into the House of Commons on October 17, 1977. The Commons became the first parliament in Canada to televise its proceedings; its lead was followed by the Quebec National Assembly in 1978 and the Saskatchewan Legislative Assembly in 1983.

In Canada today, proceedings are televised in Ottawa and in eight provincial legislatures. Broadcasting services will become available in the Northwest territories in 1993. In the Yukon Territories, a local cable company carries sporadic broadcasts of Question Period.<sup>3</sup> Other major Commonwealth countries that televise their legislative proceedings include: Great Britain, India, Australia and New Zealand. The U.S. House of Representatives and Senate also televise congressional proceedings.



## Parliamentary Television at Queen's Park

In Ontario, as early as 1975 the Ontario Commission on the Legislature (Camp Commission) recommended that the provincial government provide television and radio coverage of the proceedings of the Legislature and its committees. According to the Camp Commission Report: "We are convinced it is past time . . . [that] the Ontario Legislature should have given such access to radio and television."<sup>4</sup> The Ontario government did not immediately implement the Camp Commission recommendations, however, because the cable television distribution system was substantially underdeveloped in Ontario in 1975.<sup>5</sup> As a compromise, in 1976 the Speaker permitted television journalists to set up their portable cameras in the Speaker's Gallery and to film excerpts of Question Period for the nightly news.

By 1977 the federal house of Commons was broadcasting Question Period in its entirety. Comparing the two services, some provincial legislators became dissatisfied with the limited television offerings emanating from Queen's Park. As the Quebec National Assembly and later the Saskatchewan Legislative Assembly began broadcasting their legislative proceedings, a number of Ontario MPPs began to complain that Ontario, the most populous province, should have been among the *first* of Canadian legislatures to televise its proceedings.<sup>6</sup> Opposition MPPs complained that citizens of Ontario could tune into their federal parliament or their city council meetings, but were still denied access to the television proceedings of their own provincial Legislature.

It was the new Liberal government who, together with the New Democrats under the 1985 Accord, moved to ensure that television was installed within the Legislative Assembly.<sup>7</sup> In July 1985, shortly after the Liberals took office, the Assembly's Board of Internal Economy (BOIE) approved in principle an in-house television broadcasting system for the Legislature.<sup>8</sup> The Standing Committee on Procedural Affairs, chaired by New Democrat, Mike Breaugh, was directed to hold public hearings to examine and report how parliamentary television could be adapted to the Ontario Legislative Assembly. The Committee travelled to Ottawa and Saskatchewan



to observe first-hand their television services before producing the report that was ultimately adopted by the House. The Committee recommended that a broadcast system modelled upon Saskatchewan's 'state-of-the-art' network be installed in the Ontario Legislature.

The spring of 1986 was utilized as a broadcast "test period" before the actual renovation of the chamber, which took place over the summer months. Lighting was designed to balance the comfort of Members, the architectural integrity of the chamber and the quality of the picture;<sup>9</sup> five cameras were installed discreetly in the chamber; and a control system was designed to operate the cameras in concert with the audio components.

The cameras were finally turned on in the legislative chamber in October 1986. In addition, Ontario was the first Canadian jurisdiction to include permanent televised committee coverage as part of its regular broadcast service.<sup>10</sup> (The federal House of Commons has only recently begun televising its parliamentary committees.)

Today, almost seven years after its introduction, an Ontario Parliamentary Network of nine channels operates within the legislative precinct. Parliamentary proceedings are broadcast from the House; committees are broadcast from the Amethyst Room. Production is overseen by the Legislature's Broadcast and Recording Service and guidelines for televising proceedings, developed in 1985 by all three parties, are enforced by the Speaker. In 1991, the Broadcast and Recording Service telecast a total of 1,552 hours of viewing time from the House and its committees.<sup>11</sup>

### **Early Reaction to the Ontario Parliamentary Channel**

Eight months after the proceedings of the provincial legislature were first broadcast, the Environics Research Group surveyed the Ontario public. The 1987 survey was conducted to determine viewership and to canvass the public's early reactions to television broadcasts of legislative proceedings.



According to the survey, almost 30% of the Ontario public had at least occasionally watched television coverage of Queen's Park. Sixty-four percent of the viewers preferred the televised House proceedings to the committee hearings;<sup>12</sup> 81% preferred evening to afternoon broadcasts.

The survey also indicated that the public liked the broadcasts. Of those who watched the proceedings, 40% said their interest in the provincial government had increased as a result of the broadcasts. Forty percent also said they were likely to watch in the future. Interest was even higher among those who watched the broadcasts frequently.<sup>13</sup>

## MEMBERS' EARLY EXPECTATIONS OF TELEVISION

The following section will compare Members' early expectations of parliamentary television with their experience of it. Examples will be drawn from both the federal House of Commons and the Ontario Legislative Assembly.

### Has Television Returned the Focus to the Legislative Chamber?

In Ontario before in-house cameras were permanently installed inside the legislative chamber, television reporters in the Speaker's Gallery engaged in a practice that, although essential to their craft, was annoying to backbench MPPs: shortly into Question Period, reporters would dismantle their portable cameras and withdraw from the Gallery in order to "scrum" the Premier or other ministers outside the chamber. This left remaining Members inside the chamber without the benefit of television coverage.

The practice suggested to backbenchers that the media thought their questions unimportant, and prompted several opposition backbenchers to petition the Speaker in support of a House-controlled and -operated television *Hansard*. New Democrat Bob Rae, then leader of the third party, raised this issue during a debate on a Private Member's Resolution advocating the establishment of television *Hansard* in the

House. Mr. Rae maintained that he was not criticizing the press gallery for leaving the House but suggesting that, as journalists wished to leave the chamber, a camera should be fixed inside to record the exchanges of the remaining Members.<sup>14</sup> It is not surprising that Bob Rae raised this concern; he had earlier been a federal Member of the House of Commons, which had been broadcasting its proceedings since 1977.

In Ontario today, nightly news clips still show journalists grilling the Premier, cabinet ministers and MPPs in media scrums. Since the advent of parliamentary television at Queen's Park, however, an important change has occurred inside the chamber; now debate among opposition leaders, Members and the Premier and fellow cabinet ministers is also covered. Moreover, the cameras continue to record the legislative proceedings after Question Period is over. Although the advent of parliamentary television has not diminished the importance of the media scrum, it can be argued that television has met Members' expectations to the extent that it has helped restore a measure of prominence to the legislative chamber.

### **Does Television Enhance the Role of the Opposition?**

#### *House of Commons*

In the early 1970s, when the federal House of Commons was deliberating whether to televise parliament, the argument was made that such coverage would enhance the publicity given to opposition parties, to their leaders and to backbenchers.

Parliamentary observers hypothesized that opposition MPs would welcome television: clips from Question Period would be rebroadcast on national news programs (to a potentially wider audience) highlighting the role of opposition parties and leaders at the expense of the government.<sup>15</sup> In 1973, however, when the Liberal government announced its decision to televise House of Commons proceedings, the opposition Conservative caucus feared that the additional exposure might enhance then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's image.<sup>16</sup> Members in the Liberal government's own caucus also expressed initial reluctance towards television in the Commons. Some Liberal backbenchers were afraid they would look foolish sitting behind ministers and saying 'yea' and 'nay' whenever called upon, like trained seals.



The New Democratic Party was the only caucus in the House of Commons wholeheartedly to endorse the proposal. The idea was attractive to New Democrats largely because they had a history of being ignored by television and rarely endorsed by Canadian newspapers during elections.<sup>17</sup> The Conservatives eventually agreed with the New Democrats that television would be more of a help than a hindrance to the opposition.

Geoffrey Stevens, former managing editor of the *Globe and Mail*, has written that in fact parliamentary television has heightened the profile of the leader of the opposition and leading opposition critics. Television has made the Leader of the Opposition appear as an equal:

He is seen every day to be sharing the same stage with [the Prime Minister]. To a lesser degree, the same is true of . . . the Leader of the New Democratic Party . . . Viewers have an opportunity to see and to judge the alternative government.<sup>18</sup>

*Maclean's* columnist, Allan Fotheringham, agrees that televising Parliament gives the opposition a greater advantage, particularly during Question Period. Fotheringham noted that when Joe Clark was leader of the opposition:

Television altered the perception of Clark as an amiable young bungler to that of a decisive, well-controlled critic. Clark, after all, was a skilled university debater, which is what Question Period is all about. The opposition has only to go on the attack. They are not expected to provide solutions in Question Period.<sup>19</sup>

Today, there is consensus among parliamentary observers that television tends to favour the opposition parties over the government. Television showcases opposition parties asking tough questions of the government during Question Period.

### *Ontario Legislature*

The debate over whether television favours the opposition continued in Ontario between 1977 and 1985.

In 1977 William Davis's governing provincial Conservatives responded cautiously to the suggestion by some opposition MPPs that, following the lead of the federal House of Commons, television should be introduced into the Ontario Legislature. Opposition critics believed that the need for television in the Ontario Legislature had become compelling: the Quebec National Assembly had begun televising its proceedings in 1978 and the Saskatchewan Legislature, in 1983. Several opposition critics charged that the government was not interested in parliamentary television because it perceived no direct advantage from it. According to one opposition MPP, the government "was firmly against having any kind of comprehensive TV coverage in the House unless it was for their *own* throne speeches and for their *own* budgets."<sup>20</sup> In the opinion of some Liberals and New Democrats, the government was stalling. Some MPPs interpreted the government's continued hesitation to install television cameras in the Ontario Legislature as proof that television would favour the opposition.

Opposition critics were aware of the opportunities for media attention granted to the governing party by virtue of its ability to create policy, to make policy announcements, to use ministerial statements, and to attend ceremonial openings of public facilities. Opportunities for the opposition parties to generate media attention were, by contrast, largely confined to staging leadership or policy conventions and to raising questions in the House. Since Question Period afforded the opposition its best chances to make news, opposition Members argued that they needed the proper technological tools for reaching the public during this one hour of each sitting day when they were able to exercise some influence over the executive. Members also had comfort and safety concerns. The makeshift camera lighting was blinding and uncomfortable to Members, and, as once when a cameraman almost dropped his portable onto the chamber below, occasionally dangerous.

The government cited costs and doubts about sufficient levels of public interest as its reasons for not installing television *Hansard*. It maintained this position despite a recommendation from the 1975 Camp Commission in favour of televising the legislative proceedings.<sup>21</sup>



But the opposition parties' strong commitment to establishing televised legislative proceedings continued. On November 15, 1984, Jim Bradley, the Liberal Member for St. Catharines, introduced Private Member's Resolution No. 40 calling for the introduction of television to provide comprehensive coverage of all proceedings in the House.<sup>22</sup> The resolution was defeated by a vote of 42 to 28.

The Conservative Party reversed its long-standing opposition to television *Hansard* following its defeat in June 1985, as former government Members began adjusting to their new status as Members of the official opposition. According to a Conservative Member on the Procedural Affairs Committee:

One of the things we all learn in politics is that the electorate did have something to say about the past performance of the Conservative Government. . . . One of the lessons I have learned from that particular rebuff . . . is that the process should be more open. I think most of my colleagues within the Conservative caucus now would support a measure to install electronic Hansard in the Legislative Assembly, notwithstanding our previous position.<sup>23</sup>

### **Does the Presence of TV Cameras Make Members More Accountable?**

On October 17, 1985, the Ontario legislators debated the *Report* from the Standing Committee on Procedural Affairs concerning television coverage of the Legislative Assembly. During the debate, the Member for Etobicoke-Humber, Jim Henderson, claimed that television would make not only Ministers feel more accountable to the citizenry, but public servants as well:

For example, it would be reassuringly much more difficult, if the Ontario health insurance plan refused coverage to a single mother of a handicapped child whose OHIP coverage lapsed because of a careless error in some employer's personnel department, for the minister responsible to be embarrassed on public television by such an act of insensitivity, however justified it might be in terms of the policy and (sic) procedurals manual of the Ministry.<sup>24</sup>

Most MPPs, including backbenchers, have come to enjoy the enhanced profile afforded by television; some, though, realize that permitting cameras in the chamber can be a mixed blessing. Members who previously would not have hesitated filling in crossword puzzles, yawning or reading their newspapers, may feel more constrained in the presence of the camera. Indeed, the fear of cameras 'invading' the club-like atmosphere of the Legislature and forcing Members to watch their appearance, attendance, language and demeanour, was among the early concerns of those Members who did not favour the proposal. The Member for Renfrew-North (Sean Conway) argued that television has forced Members to "clean up their act":

The legislature of 1992 bears, in many ways, little resemblance to the legislature I came to in 1975 for a couple of reasons. Television, it's only television that's cleaned up the act to a greater extent, because now you can't stagger in drunk, as many people did . . . . You still can fall asleep, but, you know, you run a real risk. I gather in Ottawa they're going to start doing the wide-(angle) shots, so if you fall asleep . . .<sup>25</sup>

Whether parliamentary television does make ministers, public servants and backbenchers feel more accountable is a matter for future study. Judging from Members' responses, it can be argued that some perceive this to be the case.

### **Has Parliamentary TV Strengthened the Role of the Backbencher?**

The mandate of the 1975 Ontario Commission on the Legislature (Camp Commission) was to make recommendations designed to enhance the role of Private Members. Accordingly, the Commission recommended televising the Legislature as a means of increasing participation of backbenchers. Televising the daily Question Period, however, has been criticized by some parliamentary observers for offering, in fact, only a limited opportunity for backbenchers to raise matters of concern to their region or community.<sup>26</sup>

Since much of Question Period is dominated by party leaders and devoted to issues guaranteed to command maximum media attention, backbenchers rarely have



opportunity to question a Minister during this time. To restore balance the Legislature's Standing Orders were amended in 1986 to include an item of business called Members' Statements. Under this provision, which is the first order of business during the sitting day, Members other than the party leader may be recognized to make a short statement. Up to three Members from each of the parties may make statements of not more than one and one-half minutes during this period.

Allowing backbench Members to appear on television gives them an opportunity to enhance their visibility, thereby strengthening their role. The practice also provides a forum for backbenchers who rarely get an opportunity to ask a question during Question Period.

### *MPPs' Use of Props*

Some Members have learned to emphasize their Statements by using props. During Members' Statements, backbench MPPs from all three parties have worn T-shirts, or caps, or brought in stage sets to publicize riding events or to celebrate national events such as the Blue Jays' 1992 World Series victory.

While props are usually used by Members in an attempt at humour or public relations, some have also used them during Question Period to attack the government. In mid-May 1992, several Conservative Members showed up in the chamber armed with tin cans and a rubber chicken to make their point against government policy:

MPP Gary Carr waved a yellow rubber hen, charging that NDPers are 'too chicken' to make tough decisions about Sunday Shopping. And MPP Don Cousens asked Treasurer Floyd Laughren to explain the difference between a beer, a pop can and a juice can in justifying his government's tax on beer cans.<sup>27</sup>

*Broadcasting the Filibuster*

Other backbench Members have learned that a filibuster can make good TV too: one such filibuster involved a use of television never before seen in the Legislature.

In the spring of 1990, opposition New Democrat Peter Kormos launched a filibuster against the Liberal government's motion to bring closure to debate on Bill 68, the proposed no-fault automobile insurance legislation. The month-long, 40-hour filibuster occupied about two and a half hours each sitting day between April 3 and April 27, 1990. Mr. Kormos offered his Queen's Park office phone number directly to the viewers, triggering hundreds of responses. "We've opened up the whole Legislative Assembly," Mr. Kormos said in an interview, "It's never been done before. This is democracy at its ultimate."<sup>28</sup>

According to Mr. Kormos, television cameras were windows on democracy:

Very few people have the opportunity to come here and see their member in action, or inaction, as the case may be . . . The TV cameras here at Queen's Park constitute the real visitor's gallery for the vast majority of Ontario citizens, those people who are going to be affected by things like Bill 68. If the members think people are not watching, they had better check around. If they think people do not take advantage of the televised proceedings at Queen's Park, they had better look around . . .<sup>29</sup>

Journalists compared Kormos to a "TV telethon host." He urged supportive viewers to call, write or fax his office<sup>30</sup> and offered prizes such as video tapes, books, and editions of *Hansard* to those who called:

Mr. Speaker, I should tell you that I have not got the results yet sent down from my office about who the winner is of *One Hundred Monkeys*, . . . and I will find out who the new owner of this book is going to be.

I should tell you that we found a few more of the "No-Fault, No Thanks" buttons that we are pleased to send

out to people who call us here at Queen's Park,  
965-7714.<sup>31</sup>

The Liberals ended the filibuster unexpectedly with a motion to suspend the 6 P.M. adjournment and extend the Legislature's hours. The effect of the move was to trap the Member into talking for the next 17 hours straight before relinquishing the floor in exhaustion. Although finally concluding the month-long filibuster, the Liberal tactic had unintended results.<sup>32</sup>

Unwittingly, however, they [the Liberals] had drawn Kormos into prime time. For 17 solid, televised hours that night and the next day, Kormos wheedled and cajoled, joked, ranted and raved against auto insurance.

It was compelling television. And people responded. In the prior two weeks, Kormos' office had received about 500 telephone messages of support. That night, he got 858 more.<sup>33</sup>

Kormos used television to go over the heads of reporters and communicate directly with the public: a demonstration of the effectiveness of parliamentary television as a tool for backbenchers that was not lost on other Members. In the House the following week, Conservative Member for Leeds-Grenville, Bob Runciman, held up his telephone number and invited viewers to call in as he launched into his own critique of the no-fault automobile insurance bill. Once again, viewers began to call.

Not all Members were convinced of the merits of this novel television opportunity for backbenchers. Some argued that allowing the public to see the Members 'hijack' the parliamentary process would create dissatisfaction with politicians and the political process. Liberal Member from Nepean, Hans Daigeler, singled out Conservative Leader Mike Harris as an example. Mr. Harris had introduced his Private Member's Bill on Zebra mussels by taking hours to list the hundreds of Ontario lakes and rivers in its title. Mr. Daigeler also referred to the earlier filibuster of the Member for Welland-Thorold:



For the last three days the Conservative Party has amply demonstrated why politicians are held in such low esteem across the country. Desperate for public attention, they have hijacked the House with adolescent antics of introducing obscure bills and forcing the Speaker to read long lists of Ontario locations . . . Wasting the taxpayers' money by frustrating the parliamentary process for days on end is an abuse of democracy, whether it is done by the member for Welland-Thorold or the leader of the third party.<sup>34</sup>

The New Democrat government's amendments to the Standing Orders may prohibit the use of such filibuster tactics in the future. The amended Standing Orders will limit the first speaker for any recognized party in the House to speak for 90 minutes under prescribed circumstances; subsequent Members will be allowed to speak for no longer than 30 minutes.<sup>35</sup>

### **Has TV Improved Decorum in the House?**

There is considerable debate over whether television has been to the benefit or to the detriment of parliamentary decorum. Early advocates of parliamentary television argued that televised proceedings would not only give the public more insight into the political process, it would also force Members to adopt a more responsible approach to debate.<sup>36</sup>

Some communications research supports the contention that the presence of television cameras discourages legislators from engaging in unruly or exhibitionistic behaviour. For example, a 1984 study that examined the effect of television on decorum in the city council meetings of Wichita, Kansas concluded that the presence of television had a positive effect:

(City) Commissioners emphasized that they are aware of the fact that being on camera can show them in either their best light or their worst; consequently they make an attempt to put their best foot forward. This usually means "doing one's homework" and watching one's demeanour. "Showboating" for the cameras is said to be relatively rare and usually is done only by

newcomers. Most specifically, the comments of one long-time observer of local politics in Wichita suggest that the televising, if anything, has changed the commission meetings from a "spectacle" to an orderly process. She explained that about 20 years ago, before the televising, city commission meetings were called the "Tuesday night fights" because some commissioners regularly got involved in heated exchanges sometimes even involving a "fist or two" being thrown. Now officials behave "more professionally, more responsibly, and in better tune with what people expect" from public officials.<sup>37</sup>

### *House of Commons*

The Commons has had 14 years of experience with parliamentary television; it is appropriate to start there when evaluating the effects of television on parliamentary decorum.

Many parliamentary observers blame television for turning the Commons' Question Period into a battleground. They argue that Question Period has evolved into something far removed from its original purpose, which was to permit ordinary backbenchers to extract information from the government. According to a recent article in *Parliamentary Government*:

During the past three decades the Question Period has been turned into a siege gun, with each shot fired according to a battle plan drawn up by the opposition leaders. Lost sight of in the heat of daily battle has been the original purpose of Question Period . . . of enabling ordinary Members of Parliament to get real information on regional and local matters of concern to their constituents.<sup>38</sup>

Contrary to the expectations of some early camera advocates, combining cameras with Question Period in the House of Commons has been volatile. The daily Question Period has always been partisan and Carol Goar, national affairs columnist for the *Toronto Star*, believes that with television, Question Period has degenerated into a "made for television farce" resembling "feeding time at the zoo":

The Members fight, they bellow, they vie for attention. They know their behaviour offends Canadians, but they can't help themselves.<sup>39</sup>

Goar argues that the broadcasts make it very difficult for MPs to restrain themselves from "playing to the cameras" or taking "cheap shots." She believes that the presence of cameras has conditioned MPs to speak in "30 second barbs — the sharper the better." And as any parliamentary observer knows, a Member whose colourful phrase or quick wit is noticed by the party's leader, or ends up as a clip on the evening news, is rewarded with party advancement or public exposure. This reward system, perpetuated by the Member's own party and the media, provides legislators with little incentive to improve their behaviour before the television cameras. Goar's distaste for MPs' disorderliness during Question Period is shared by a number of other journalists in headlines that leave little doubt as to the journalists' views of Members' conduct during Question Period: "Four MPs hope to tame parliamentary zoo;" "Pathetic Games in the House play fast and loose with democracy;" "Even MPs hate Question Period;" "Question Period buffoonery sours the democratic spirit;" "Question Period needs radical renovation;" and "Tough to reform Question Period."

This view is echoed by viewers of the House of Commons across Canada. The Citizens' Forum on Canada's Future (Spicer Commission) heard numerous complaints from participants who were annoyed with the way parliamentarians conducted themselves on television. According to a participant quoted in the Commission's Report:

(It is) just terrible the way they carry on in Parliament like unruly children. Bad tempered brats, no control, quarrelling between parties. Why don't they get together and use their better ideas?<sup>40</sup>

In their report, the commissioners also criticized the media for overemphasizing confrontation and for editorializing the presentation of issues. In particular, the commissioners viewed the media as too often exaggerating a normal political adversarial system:



One example is the media's tendency to cover the House of Commons' daily Question Period mainly for its posturing, theatrical value, instead of covering thoroughly the more demanding, yet revealing committee meetings where MPs analyze proposed laws in detail.<sup>41</sup>

Commenting on what Citizens' Forum participants said about behaviour in the Parliamentary Chambers, the commissioners said:

We join with Forum participants in deploring the mindless, and sometimes disgraceful, behaviour of members of both Houses in bringing the parliamentary system into disrepute. . . . We agree . . . with the fact that our system is too partisan and far too adversarial. In particular, we would urge a careful review of the Question Period and how it is organized, with an eye on the more productive Question Periods in other parliamentary systems.<sup>42</sup>

A recent *Globe and Mail* article confirmed that MPs are sufficiently worried about the Spicer Report to consider modifying their behaviour. And some Members are making efforts to behave with more propriety in the House of Commons.

### *MPs' Efforts to 'Clean Up' Question Period*

One proposal for improving order in the House involves the use of wide-angle camera angles. The tight composition shot, in which the lens is trained either on the Speaker or the Member who has the floor, has the drawback of isolating the speaker from context. Government House Leader Harvie André in a recent *Globe and Mail* article spoke of conducting public opinion research on the House of Commons and finding that, as a result of narrow shots, many Canadians were baffled by the daily theatrics of Question Period. According to Mr. André, "people didn't understand what was going on. It was all very confusing. All they saw was shouting heads, screaming and yelling. It was without a context. To see someone in isolation ranting and raving — it looks strange."<sup>43</sup> Wide-angle shots were introduced to put MPs in a 'broader context' and to expose the hecklers:

The wide-angle shots are designed to help viewers understand exactly what is happening in Question Period . . . . But they also have another effect: they reduce the noise and turmoil in the Commons because hecklers know they could be instantly exposed on television. As many as 30 MPs can be visible in each wide-angle shot, so all Members must be careful in their behaviour.<sup>44</sup>

Advocates of the new camera views assumed that once Members became aware that they were on camera, they would avoid extreme disruptions in an effort to appear more dignified. In practice, however, this may be an oversimplification: wider camera shots are already used at the Ontario Legislature and have had no appreciable effect in deterring hecklers.

In early 1992, another effort was made to bring a little dignity to the Commons. Four Mps — Conservatives Jim Edwards and Albert Cooper and Liberals John Manley and Gilbert Parent — launched a quiet campaign designed "to encourage, cajole, if need be shame, their seatmates into cleaning up their act."<sup>45</sup> According to Mr. Cooper, "the public is fed up with seeing us behave like spoiled children. I think there are members on all sides of the House who want to change. So we decided to see what we could do."<sup>46</sup> Two things have motivated these four MPs to embark upon this venture: that they are hearing from their constituents that the public is "fed up," and the MPs argue that members work very well together in committee where the real work of parliament gets done. These MPs believe that if the teamwork that MPs practise in committees could be transplanted to the House of Commons, Canadians would be much happier with what they see.

### *The Ontario Legislative Assembly*

Some Ontario MPPs have expressed concern about what they perceive in the chamber as a lack of respect for women. Marion Boyd, Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, recently told a Legislative Assembly committee:



As a Member of Provincial Parliament, I'm concerned about the atmosphere of disrespect that prevails in the Ontario Legislature. As the Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, I'm especially concerned about the discriminatory language and behaviour that contributes to this atmosphere of disrespect.<sup>47</sup>

Although she acknowledged that legislative proceedings are adversarial and sometimes hostile, she was particularly concerned with what she considered the sexist behaviour of male MPPs towards female Members.

Videotapes of House proceedings provide ample evidence of these tactics. As such, they are not the imaginings of overly sensitive women who can't take the heat of the legislative kitchen.<sup>48</sup>

Committee Members responded to Ms. Boyd's argument by raising issues of their own. Ms. Sullivan (Halton-Centre) disagreed that the Legislature was particularly sexist; she was more concerned about vicious personal criticisms that occur during debate. Mr. McLean (Simcoe-East) worried most about an overall absence of decorum in the Legislature:

I'm not very happy and the people of this province are not very happy with what they're seeing in the legislature. I feel badly for the students who come here, who have to watch what goes on. I also have concerns with regard to the operation of question period. . . . The decorum in the legislature is the greatest concern I have around here.<sup>49</sup>

During the discussion, committee Members repeatedly referred to the lack of restraint in the House. The only Member who linked the disorder to the presence of television cameras, argued that rather than ruining decorum, television has been the 'saviour' of good form in the House.<sup>50</sup>

Both on Parliament Hill and at Queen's Park, Members are currently discussing the problem of disorderliness in the House. Many admit that they feel uncomfortable about how the House is perceived by viewers. Whether television has improved or

worsened decorum is open to continuing debate. However, most parliamentary observers would agree that the level of partisanship has risen since the advent of television cameras.

### **Has Television Improved Citizens' Access to the Legislature?**

Visitors to the House of Commons or to the Legislative Assembly in Ontario have always been welcome to sit in the visitors gallery and watch the proceedings when the House is in session. However, most citizens of Ontario live far from the capital. When MPPs debated the report of the Standing Committee on Procedural Affairs, several speculated that one of the key benefits of parliamentary television would be that the Legislature would become accessible to Ontario citizens living in remote parts of the province. According to the Chair of the Procedural Affairs Committee:

It is our purpose to provide people in Thunder Bay, all through the north, in eastern Ontario and in southwestern Ontario with the exact same opportunity of following the proceedings of the Legislature as someone who happens to live in Toronto who can drop into the chamber, sit in the gallery on an evening like this and see what is happening to a certain bill, what is happening to a committee report or just what is going on in the Legislature of Ontario.<sup>51</sup>

Making access to the Legislature possible through television was perceived by Members as an enhancement of parliamentary democracy: viewers would be guaranteed their right to know what goes on in their Legislature; they would see Members raise questions and debate legislation. Furthermore, Members believed that parliamentary television would expand the public's interest in the proceedings of the Legislature.<sup>52</sup>



*Increased Access Bears a Cost*

Television has improved ordinary citizens' contact with the Legislature.

Unfortunately, public access has been achieved at a price: growing public disapproval of parliamentarians.

Increased television access to our parliamentary institutions has coincided with public opinion poll results clearly unfavourable to elected representatives. In addition to the findings of the Spicer Commission, a November 1991 Gallup poll indicated that 58% of Canadians believed that the behaviour of Members on both sides of the House of Commons is disrespectful and improper.<sup>53</sup>

Anxiety about television *Hansard* was also voiced by Kazimieras Antanavicius, a Lithuanian deputy who visited Canada's Parliament in May 1992. When asked whether he supported the concept of bringing television cameras into his parliament, Mr. Antanavicius demurred: the prospect of televised proceedings seemed to present a trade off between enhancing citizen access to the Lithuanian houses of parliament and undermining the public's faith in a fragile democracy. According to Mr. Antanavicius, "we don't know if this (television) will be a good thing. People might lose faith in democracy if they see politicians fighting all the time."<sup>54</sup>

**Will Parliamentary TV Provide Citizens with Useful Public Policy Information?**

When the Procedural Affairs Committee examined parliamentary television, Chair Mike Breaugh pointed out that citizens would learn important public policy information as a result of televised proceedings. For example, an engineer anywhere in the province could watch the progress of a bill amending the *Professional Engineers Act*. Other Members emphasized that parliamentary television was meant to provide an information service to citizens who wished to find out what was happening in their provincial parliament.

Televised coverage of the House of Commons or the Ontario Legislature provides the opportunity to educate citizens, interest groups and other viewers about matters of public policy and government administration. The public may learn which issues the government views as priorities, and which issues are of concern to the opposition. Moreover, viewers may learn of the alternatives the opposition parties would put forward in place of the Government's measures.

Whether the broadcasts are providing useful information to citizens cannot be properly evaluated until surveys of the Ontario public are conducted. As noted previously, an early 1987 Environics *Focus Ontario* survey of the Ontario public's reaction to televised legislative proceedings indicated that 40% of viewers said their interest in the provincial government had increased as a result of the broadcasts.<sup>55</sup> In order to find out whether that number has grown or diminished, it would be necessary to conduct another survey.

## CONCLUSION

Television came to the Ontario Legislature in 1986 with the active support of the Liberals and New Democrats. During their more than 42 years in opposition, Liberal and New Democrat backbenchers had believed themselves systematically ignored by the media, particularly the television media. However, in their attempt to right this imbalance, TV advocates, assuming that "opening up" the legislative process could only be beneficial, may have overlooked negative aspects associated with televising legislative proceedings.

This paper has examined some of the benefits of parliamentary television and some of television's drawbacks. While regular broadcasting has not diminished the importance of the media scrum, it has at least helped to return the focus of debate to the chambers of the House of Commons and the Ontario Legislature. Television has also improved parliamentary democracy by highlighting the roles of opposition parties and the backbencher. Yet another benefit flowing from parliamentary television is the perception held by Members that cameras make Ministers, Members and public

servants feel more accountable. Parliamentary Television has also improved access to the Legislature by ordinary citizens in remote regions of the province. Moreover, it provides the public with important public policy information.

On the other hand, television may have encouraged some Members to become more partisan rather than to take the more responsible approach to debate many Members had hoped for. Moreover, the benefits of increased viewer access to legislative proceedings have been offset by the reality that viewers do not always approve of what they see. The results of public opinion polls and the Spicer Report show that viewers regard the behaviour of Members on all sides as unacceptable.

In light of these concerns the Committee's early endorsement of television may seem, today, overenthusiastic. Though television has provided access, information and accountability, judgement about the overall effect of televising legislatures has been tempered by developments since its introduction.



## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Ward, *The Hansard Chronicles* (Ottawa: Deneau and Greenburg, 1980), p. xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Marshall, "Why can't we all see what happens in parliament?" *Maclean's* (April 1968): 93.

<sup>3</sup> Telephone interviews with Speakers' Offices of all provincial legislatures and two territorial legislatures, 16 and 19 October 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Ontario, Commission on the Legislature, *Fifth Report* (Toronto: The Commission, 1975), p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 9. The Report pointed out that the cable distribution system as it existed put practical limitations on plans to broadcast the proceedings of the Ontario Legislature. Therefore, the Commissioners recognized that Ontario legislators must fit any proposals for coverage of their activities into the existing or planned cable distribution system.

<sup>6</sup> Ontario, Legislative Assembly, *Hansard: Official Report of Debates*, 33rd Parliament, 3rd Session (17 October 1985): 882.

<sup>7</sup> The establishment of televised coverage of legislative proceedings had such a high priority that it constituted one of the "legislative reform" components of the historic 1985 Liberal-New Democratic Party Accord.

<sup>8</sup> Ontario, Legislative Assembly, Standing Committee on Procedural Affairs and Agencies, Boards and Commissions, *Television Coverage of the Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly* (Toronto: The Committee, 1985), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Tom Mitchinson, "Will the government get good ratings?" *Broadcaster* (September 1986): 20.

<sup>10</sup> Mitchinson, "Ratings?"

<sup>11</sup> Telephone interview with Marion Powell, Administrative Assistant, Broadcast and Recording Service, Toronto, 29 October 1992.

<sup>12</sup> Donna Dasko, Senior Associate, Environics Research Group, Toronto, 30 June 1987, letter to William Preiner, Corporate Advertising and Special Projects Group, Ministry of Tourism and Recreation. Environics Research Group Sampled 1,007 Ontario adults by telephone between June 8 and June 21, 1987 in six regions of Ontario. The effective response rate for the survey was 27%. A sample of 1,007 persons within the population produces a sampling error of + or - 3.2% in 95 out of 100 samples.

<sup>13</sup> Dasko letter to Preiner.

<sup>14</sup> Ontario, Legislative Assembly, *Hansard: Official Report of Debates*, 32nd Parliament, 4th Session (15 November 1984): 4159.

<sup>15</sup> Price and Clark, "Television," p. 69.

<sup>16</sup> Orland French, "TV for the House: no closer than in 1975," *Globe and Mail*, 30 November 1982.

<sup>17</sup> Richard G. Price and Harold D. Clarke, "Television and the House of Commons," in *Parliament, Policy and Representation*, ed. Harold D. Clarke et al. (Agincourt: Methuen, 1980), p. 60.

<sup>18</sup> Geoffrey Stevens, "The Influence and Responsibilities of the Media," in *The Legislative Process in Canada: The Need for Reform*, ed. William A. W. Neilson and James C. MacPherson (Toronto: Butterworth and Co., 1978), p. 233.

<sup>19</sup> Allan Fotheringham, "Hey man, have you read Hansard? No . . . but I saw the show!" *Maclean's* (26 December 1977): 48.

<sup>20</sup> Ontario, Legislative Assembly, *Hansard: Official Report of Debates*, 33rd Parliament, 1st Session (17 October 1985): 876.

<sup>21</sup> The Camp Commission's mandate was to make recommendations designed to enhance the role of the Private Member in the Ontario Legislative Assembly. Commissioners favoured television because they observed that most citizens receive their primary impression of government from television. They further believed that there was a growing interest in provincial affairs that televised legislative proceedings would fulfil. Lastly, they supported television because they believed that it would restore the Legislature to its central place at the heart of Ontario public affairs, and reduce the importance of the media scrum.

<sup>22</sup> Ontario, Legislative Assembly, *Hansard: Official Report of Debates*, 32nd Parliament, 4th Session (15 November 1984): 4149.

<sup>23</sup> Ontario, Legislative Assembly, Standing Committee on Procedural Affairs, *Preliminary transcripts* (Toronto: The Committee, 4 September 1985, morning sitting), p. P-9.

<sup>24</sup> Ontario, Legislative Assembly, *Hansard: Official Report of Debates*, 33rd Parliament, 1st Session (17 October 1985): 886.

<sup>25</sup> Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly, *Conduct of Members* (27 May 1992): 1655-2.

<sup>26</sup> Peter C. Dobell and Hon. John Reid, P.C., "A larger role for the House of Commons," *Parliamentary Government* (April 1992): 6.

<sup>27</sup> "Prop department," *Toronto Sun*, 17 May 1992.

<sup>28</sup> Antonia Zerbisias, "Television," *Toronto Star*, 24 April 1990.

<sup>29</sup> Ontario, Legislative Assembly, *Hansard: Official Report of Debates*, 34th Parliament, 2nd Session (12 April 1990): 513.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Mackie, "17-hour speech ends filibuster, puts young MPP centre stage," *Globe and Mail*, 28 April 1990.

<sup>31</sup> Ontario, Legislative Assembly, *Hansard: Official Report of Debates*, 34th Parliament, 2nd Session (23 April 1990): 705.

<sup>32</sup> Mackie, "17-hour speech."

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Walkom, "Telepolitician Kormos beats the system," *Toronto Star*, 29 May 1990.

<sup>34</sup> Ontario, Legislative Assembly, *Hansard: Official Report of Debates*, 35th Parliament, 1st Session (7 May 1991): 1207.

<sup>35</sup> Ontario, Legislative Assembly, *Hansard: Official Report of Debates*, 35th Parliament, 2nd Session (25 June 1992): 1702.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Stanbury, "Bring the cameras into the House," *Canadian Business* (December 1968): 32.

<sup>37</sup> Elaine B. Sharp, "Consequences of local government under the Klieg Lights," *Communications Research* (11 October 1984): 503.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Dobell and Byron Berry, "Support for political reform," *Parliamentary Government* (January 1992): 20.

<sup>39</sup> Carol Goar, "Four MPs hope to tame parliamentary zoo," *Toronto Star*, 1 February 1992.

<sup>40</sup> Canada, Citizens' Forum on Canada's Future, *Report to the People and Government of Canada* (Ottawa: The Forum, 1991), p. 97.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>43</sup> Geoffrey York, "Image makers tune in to TV angle," *Globe and Mail*, 9 May 1992.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Carol Goar, "Four MPs". Jim Edwards (Edmonton Southwest); Albert Cooper (Peace River); John Manley (Ottawa South); and Gilbert Parent (Welland-St. Catharines-Thorold). MP Jim Edwards was subsequently a leadership candidate for the Progressive Conservatives. He has since been appointed Chair of Treasury Board.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly, *Conduct of Members*, p. 1540-1.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1545-2.



<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 1635-1, 2.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 1655-2.

<sup>51</sup> Ontario, Legislative Assembly, *Hansard: Official Report of Debates*, 33rd Parliament, 1st Session (17 October 1985): 873.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 885.

<sup>53</sup> Gallup Canada, "Most believe MPs' behaviour improper," *Toronto Star*, 25 November 1991.

<sup>54</sup> "Parliamentary TV: Adjusting our sets," *Hamilton Spectator*, 13 May 1992.

<sup>55</sup> Dasko letter to Preiner.







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